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The School for Life

and the Academy in Sorø

1838

Excerpt #1



[N F S Grundtvig, 1783–1872](#)

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Although this opposition has as little to do with the spirit of Christianity as the conclusions that were drawn from it, nonetheless Christianity's letter and shadow have undeniably served to sanctify both. After the school had laid us in the grave, or at least deformed our healthy human nature and eroded our vitality, our forefathers apparently consoled themselves with the thought that it was only the body that was being killed, only our completely depraved human nature that was being maltreated. As long as we had learned our scripture and catechism as well as the next man, we had obtained a title-deed to eternal life. As for temporal death, far from separating us from it, it was precisely the only road and desirable bridge towards that eternal life. I realise that this superstition with a Christian appearance is a long way from either oppressing or comforting many people in our time. But what our forefathers ascribed in particular to the sort of Christianity that can be learned from books and forced into children is now generally ascribed to all manner of book-knowledge and mechanical reflection! These are supposed to be an everlasting gain for the soul, however useless or even damaging they may appear on earth to both body and soul and to all the skilfulness towards which the life of man is predisposed, as well as to all the industriousness upon which our earthly welfare, cheerfulness, and common sense evidently rest through the will of Providence and the nature of our being.

Wherever this unnatural partiality for death prevails, it does not seem very helpful to defend life in black and white or to enumerate the deadly sins of the school. Yet there are those of us who either by natural strength or particularly favourable circumstances retain enough human vitality to survive the sickness. We can see how the school works towards the destruction of the final remains of our glorious human nature, until all civilised nations inevitably become slaves of their animal nature and of the barbarism around them. We cannot therefore do other than testify, exhort, and warn, first by speech and example as far as they go, and then by the pen - if for no other reason than to prove how dead and powerless are those written letters of the alphabet for which people sacrifice the lives of their children and from which they expect eternal fruits.

The situation is not quite so desperate as it appears, and least of all in Denmark, where the so-called 'educated circles' are in fact more natural at heart than they appear or dare admit themselves to be. In Denmark it would be a rare event if

someone really wished himself or his children to die as a result of education and literary skill! So at least among us speech and writing will gain sufficient acceptance and, so to speak, 'general applause' - to Death's chagrin and in the interests of life - as soon as one understands their purpose. The fact that this is very difficult must not surprise us, since precisely because we are correct in our allegation of the demoralizing influence of the dead school system, we who speak and write and they who listen and read cannot help but suffer from a great lack of vitality and from making a mess of our own mother-tongue.

The feeling that we are in urgent need of a School for Life - as we have also recently learned from the vociferous people's voice in Roskilde and Viborg - must by now be fairly widespread in Denmark. So when nevertheless more Schools for Death are requested, it is a clear and simple error that can easily be explained. It is partly due to the lack of that clear-sighted eye for life which is pre-conditioned in the lack of schools for life, and partly due to the gullibility of the Danes, who will invariably and until further notice accept it as an article of faith when - quite unlike the Grammar School, which openly professes a pact with death - a school boldly pretends to be 'the narrow road that leads to life'. So the more we teach ourselves to speak and write naturally, clearly, plainly, and cheerfully about this 'matter of life and death', the more the living Danish education that we so wish to replace the dead Latin one will be understood and cherished. What makes the case look desperate is partly the genteel ambition of most Latinists, both young and old, great and small, and partly the natural weakness of the Danes where logic is concerned. For genteel ambition resents the thought that a school education may not have been a giant stride forward to enlightenment but actually a step backward from life. The Danes' weakness in logic - despite their strong objections and their everyday experience - easily dupes them into believing that either in grammar or in mathematics there is a panacea that will cure everything in the course of time even if its mode of operation is unintelligible to ourselves. Apparently it is also absolute folly to believe that human nature, the life of a nation, and its mother-tongue would be able to win their case in a court thus constituted. But appearances deceive, and nowhere more so than Denmark, where there is now sorrow, now joy. So, just as we have found many good things under the appearance of the opposite, we shall also similarly find powerful spokesmen for nature, life, and the mother-tongue, even if all the spokesmen are wearing women's clothes!

Indeed, on that we can and must depend! Mother Denmark and her daughters will soon learn how to understand us, even though we chatter away in a somewhat stilted and obscure manner about life and the definite advantages of resolute and vigorous industriousness, and of the mother-tongue in all circumstances and in particular for 'everyday use', rather than about mathematics and grammar, algebra, lettering, and all sorts of scholasticism. As soon as we in Denmark have won *woman*

to our cause, we have won the kingdom's immortal queen, since the king will never for long have the heart to refuse her anything. Indeed, it is at that point that we have won Denmark's heart, which the head can never bear to crush. This outcome, with its own deep, natural reasons, will be found to hold good more or less everywhere, and in Denmark is so completely and radically the case as scarcely anywhere else. In our country, when nobody else knows how a man is to be made to see reason, his wife is sure to know.

And among us there is hardly an old headmaster, much less a young teacher, whom pretty girls could not easily teach how to raise his mother-tongue far above all dead languages. Once women in Denmark realise that under the old system their language and all the enlightenment and education they can achieve, without learning either mathematics or Latin grammar, is called coarseness and barbarism, the old system will lapse of its own accord.

I see this with my own eyes every time, despite my express prohibition and my moving description of all the misery that will most likely follow, my wife clears up my study, cleans the windows, and compels me firmly to kiss her for it! Meanwhile I scratch behind my ears and cannot deny that the room has become lighter and more attractive, and that the little things that may have been mislaid are much easier to find than before, when everything was hidden in half-light under the dust and piles of paper. This is definitely what will happen to the inner study in the Danish man's head, once the Danish woman has the courage to clear up and clean the windows there.

But is it not a treasonable offence to teach the members of this beautiful and kind sex - who are captivating and highly ingenious at handling men, yet nonetheless completely un-lettered and un-mathematical, unscientific, and therefore inherently spiritless, unreasoning, and barbaric - is it not treason to teach them to know their own powers, or at least use them in the field of education, which they have so far modestly left in the hands of men? Is it not simply a blind physical power, and therefore precisely the strongest, most dangerous, and most terrible power we can ally ourselves with in order to topple what we call a tyranny - especially since we do not have the least guarantee that it will not, in its blind activity, turn bad to worse and cast us headlong back into barbarism?

If the fair sex we are talking about were not Mother Denmark and her true daughters, or if I were not something of an historian and a Nordic poet, I really do not know how I would answer. But now the matter speaks for itself. For like all Denmark's serious poets, I must thank Mother Denmark and her daughters for the fact that we did not have to emigrate like the North Americans to find readers. And as an historian I would claim that it was not those members of the fair sex who

abused their superiority to the detriment of spirit and life who wished to ally themselves with me, not the friend of naturalness and the mother-tongue and useful industriousness. It was exactly the opposite that was the case, while Mother Denmark gave birth to, and her daughters garlanded, not only the heroes who defended the kingdom against all barbarians but also the poets who in every land are the natural priests of the national spirit as well as the saga-tellers who penned striking records of the deeds of the heroes. Finally I must add that it is not for lack of solid arguments against the school that fights with nature, the life of the people, and the mother-tongue that I feel the need for assistance from the fair sex. It is only because the irrational preference for the unnatural, for bookwormery, and for dead languages defies all argument and can only be defeated by another and stronger natural love which sets life high above books and which is at one with the mother-tongue. It is only in order to validate this, to underline my alliance with Mother Denmark and her daughters, and to demonstrate its innocence and the benefits that its promise of victory must entail - and not our of any confidence in the effect of rational argument at present - that I shall endeavour to demonstrate the necessity of a People's High School for the people. Far from spiritually outlawing Mother Denmark and wounding her deepest feelings, this exposition will appeal both to her head and to her heart.

Let me first attempt to state as clearly as possible what I understand by the School for Life, since I have noticed that the majority have rather vague or even quite wrong ideas about such an institution. At the moment it exists only as an idea on paper, unfortunately. The result is that it is always believed to be a literary laboratory where the rules are decreed and inculcated, according to which one must correct, improve, and in fact, remake life completely. The beginning of this process is, of course, a disintegration - that is to say, a death. This typically German fancy - that life must be explained before it is lived transformed, according to the learned heads - can only mean all the schools it establishes into workshops of death and decomposition, where the worms live well at the expense of life. This fancy I completely reject. I maintain that if the school really is to be an educational institution for the benefit of life, it must first make neither education nor itself its goal. The primary goal must be what serves the interests of life. Secondly, it must take life as it really is and strive only to illuminate it and promote what makes it serviceable. No school can create a new life in us. It must therefore neither destroy the old one nor waste time developing rules that a different and better life would supposedly follow, if we ever possessed it.

Since human life in all its complexity may nevertheless be classified into three main branches - the religious, the social, and the academic - one could correspondingly imagine three sorts of Schools for Life: the Church School, the People's High School, and the University. These must of course have the same diversity as their

corresponding life in society. But since they said at Roskilde and Viborg that only the People's School was missing, this is the one I shall dwell on here - so much the more since it is the only one common to us all. We can and must all become educated and useful citizens, Danish citizens, but obviously only a few at a time can become professors and scholars. And as long as we do not delude ourselves that the Church School can create a religious and Christian life where it does not exist, we must conclude that we have enough church schools just as we have enough churches, for wherever life does not exist, its enlightenment is completely superfluous. Finally we have too many institutions rather than too few, too large rather than too small, in which to educate our clergy and our professors, whereas we have none at all in which to educate Danish citizens. So even if all our educational institutions were admirable and appropriate they would be quite inadequate so long as we lacked a high school for the national social life in which we must all participate and regard as the natural root and source of all endeavour. If our social life is spurned and neglected, all other education must itself be as dead as it is deadening for our people and damaging for the kingdom;

I am well aware that this way of thinking is a great heresy among the academics since the Latinists have to maintain that to become a good Latinist one must above all be on guard against Danish and all Danicisms. One must constantly get away from Danish barbarism to 'classical soil', if one is to be at home among the ancients. At the same time the mathematicians preach a pure scientific spirit that is really concerned with neither life nor death, nor indeed any sort of human activity. In itself this spirit is so universal and cosmopolitan in its application that it cannot possibly limit itself to any particular language, or give special preference to the needs and interests of any individual nation or kingdom, unless it is precisely there that both pure and applied mathematics is given most study and widest scope. Without retracting my own 'academic' heresy - which lies roughly equidistant from both of these 'confessions' and proclaims the whole great life of man, of our race, not excluding but embracing the life of the nations and the individual as the object and task of the true, living spirit of learning - I nevertheless wish here sedulously to avoid all learned controversy, only from my own position as a common citizen do I observe that the country and the people are very badly served by 'erudite' men on their guard against their mother-tongue, and not much better served by those who want everything to be added up into measures and numbers. So they would do all countries a great service if they founded a 'Learned Republic' in New South Wales, or wherever else there is room, and either made Latin their mother-tongue there or created a universal language in which they informed the world, by the first ship available, of their discoveries, be it in Latin grammar or pure mathematics or somewhere in between. They would doubtless have been given this advice a long while ago if people had not held the conviction that the dead languages, and particularly Latin grammar, were not only the source of all profound knowledge but

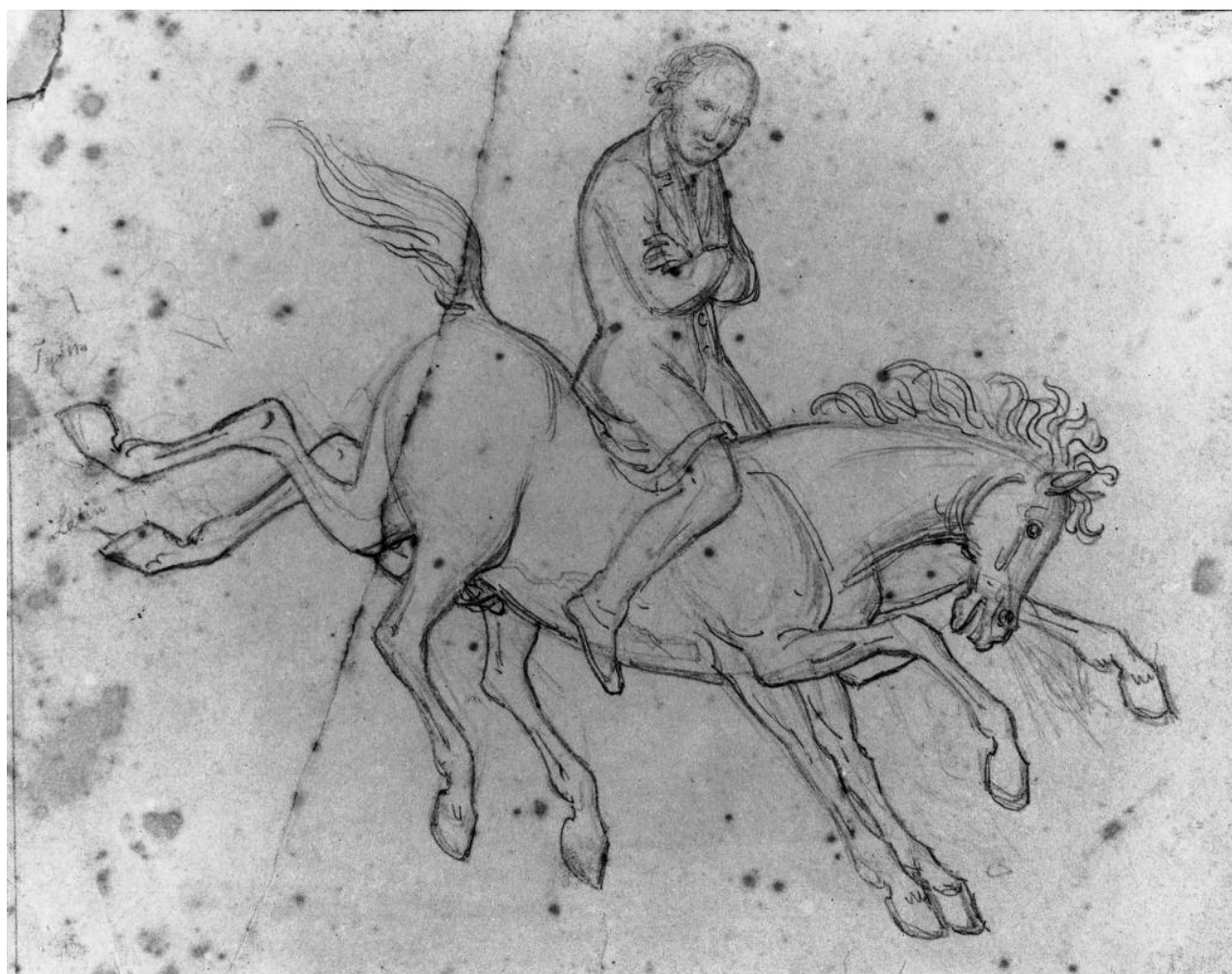
also of the education that was desired for all state civil servants and required for the clergy, judges, and the like. People even believe that mathematics can now perform miracles to improve and ennoble all *social* pursuits, while simultaneously sharpening the intellect to explain virtually everything!

To make this as short and as clear as possible, I accept for what it is worth that the Danish clergy, judges, and so on, in order to become competent civil servants in their field, have to plough through Latin grammar in their childhood and write innumerable Latin essays. Later at university, in addition to text books in mathematics, astronomy, physics, and practical and speculative philosophy, they still have to be taught, in the case of the clergy, to translate and explain the New Testament in Latin, and, in the case of the judges, to apply Roman Law to Danish conditions and translate and understand Danish Law in Latin. I allow all this to speak for itself, because the good cause will gain nothing from using my pen to attack so deeply-rooted a prejudice. But I confess that it is my firm conviction that all boyish pseudo-learning is a pestilence, and that bookwormery, segregation from the people, disregard of the mother-tongue, and an idolisation of Latin literature -which is inimical to all nations and kings and consists of eulogies over tyranny and rebellion - are the most inappropriate childhood learning for Royal Danish civil servants that I can imagine!

Suppose, however, that I was utterly mistaken in thinking this way. Suppose that I myself had to thank Latin grammar and exercises, reading classics, and doing Latin exegesis of the New Testament for being able to become the sound Danish priest and patriot I fancy myself to be. Even if this were true, it is not through Latin grammar and essays and going to Grammar School that we come to love Denmark or become familiar with the people and its mother-tongue. So here at least one gap exists in our system for educating Danish civil servants to have an active influence on the life of Danish society and its people - as clergy and jurists must. This gap cannot be filled by anything less than a high school for Danish national and social life, where the Mother-tongue is sovereign and everything has to do with the King, the People, and the Fatherland. Furthermore, even if one were to claim that a close acquaintance with Latin (a language completely alien to Danish) and a general knowledge of Rome (the tyrannical enemy of kings and nations) were the best preparation for a partiality for, and a familiarity with, all things Danish -because compressed opposites are best suited to illuminate each other (*opposita juxta posita magis illucescunt*) -it cannot be denied that it is a hazardous venture to stop halfway and merely trust to luck that a Danish culture will be the result, and that Latin will then be seen in its proper, hateful, and abhorrent light.

For unless this change occurs, we shall become more unsuitable as Royal Danish civil servants the more we learn to write and speak Latin, and the more completely

we have grasped and assimilated the Roman outlook, thought-mode, and speech pattern. These are not just totally alien to the Danes' nature, mother-tongue, and circumstances, they are actually inimical to them. I myself have spent at least thirty years getting Rome and Latin out of my system to the extent that can now be seen and heard. And in many respects this can only be called a modest success, even though I have really had nothing else to do and yet have seldom been idle. So if it should be found appropriate in future to let the Royal Danish civil servants take this dangerous Appian or Latin detour to the Danishness they least of all can do without, then the homeward journey from classical soil and the conversion from the Roman thought-mode and the Latin style must be made easier for them in every possible way.



Grundtvig on [Sleipnir](#)

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